

What is reception history and does it have a value in biblical studies?

In this essay a definition of reception history will be explored, with a discussion locating reception history within the broader discipline of biblical studies. A brief case study will be applied to analyse the significance of reception history within historic and contemporary biblical interpretation.

Defining reception history

Brennan Breed asserts that texts become subject to reception history as soon as they are written, or at least as soon as they leave their original contexts. A distinction is drawn between seeking to understand the original context of a biblical text, identified as biblical criticism, and seeking to understanding how a biblical text has been interpreted, applied and understood since its writing: reception history.¹ However, Ian Boxall describes reception history as 'more than simply the 'history of interpretation'', as it considers not only academic commentaries but is expansive in its consideration of many other forms of reception, including artistic expressions, hymnody, preaching and reflections.² Reception history is therefore helpful in demonstrating how a biblical text has been received and applied culturally, in a broad sense, over time.

Received meaning is explored by Mary Callaway, who observes that reception history's fundamental premise is that texts do not have intrinsic meanings but that the readers who receive texts produce the meanings.³ Thus, original context might be only of partial importance, as the reader's own contemporary context and understanding will have a greater impact. Indeed, as John Sawyer comments, 'A text without a reader has no meaning.'⁴ Callaway also notes a description of reception history used by *Blackwell* for its series on the subject: 'use, influence and impact of the Bible'.⁵ Impact is emphasised by Ulrich Luz, building on the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wirkungsgeschichte*, which he translates as 'effective history': reception history can analyse the effect or impact of a text over time and across cultures, recognising that any reader or interpreter is part of a continuous spectrum of engagement and interpretation.⁶ Jonathan Roberts illuminates 'worldly records of those manifest and mysterious individual and corporate experiences of the biblical text', recognising the 'living relationship' between the text and reader; this subjectivity is in contrast to seeking to establish a single, stable meaning from a text. He argues that attempts to stabilise a 'foundational meaning' do not acknowledge the 'human importance' of a text which is achieved through reception history.⁷ Contingent reader participation is thus a further dimension alongside the subjectivity of meaning.

¹ B.W. BREED (2014) *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History* [Online], p.3.

² I. BOXALL *New Testament Interpretation* (London: SCM Press, 2007), p.177.

³ M.C. CALLAWAY *What's the use of Reception History?* (Presentation given at the Society of Biblical Literature meeting, San Antonio, Texas, 2004) [Online], p.4.

⁴ J.F.A. SAWYER (2004) *The Role of Reception Theory, Reader-Response Criticism and/or Impact History in the Study of the Bible: Definition and Evaluation* (Presentation given at the Society of Biblical Literature meeting, San Antonio, Texas, 2004) [Online], p.1.

⁵ M.C. CALLAWAY *What's the use of Reception History?*, p.1.

⁶ U. LUZ in C. Rowland and C. Tuckett (eds.) *The Nature of New Testament Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp.124-126.

⁷ J. ROBERTS 'Introduction' in M. Lieb, E. Mason, J. Roberts and C. Rowland (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of The Reception History of the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.8.

There would appear to be a spectrum of opinion around a definition for reception history: for this student a definition would need to include recognition of how a text has been understood and used over time; the impact and influence it has subsequently had in a broad sense on individuals and cultures through various media; and the derivation of meanings by the readers apart from the text's original context.

The relationship between reception history and biblical studies

Writing before reception history was widely-used as a term, Brevard Childs relates the complexity of attempting to establish the historicity of biblical texts with any degree of certainty because of the inter-connectivity of historical-critical approaches and theological interpretation: what he describes as the 'dichotomy between objective history and subjective appropriation'.⁸ It could be argued from Childs' thoughts that reception history within the Bible might be at least partially responsible for this difficulty: the self-referential nature of Scripture, particularly but not exclusively between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, can make it difficult to establish absolute knowledge of context and meaning.

There is evidently discomfort for some biblical scholars regarding the way in which, as a discrete discipline, reception history can be seen to stand against the historical-critical approach which has sought to establish contexts, authorial intentions and even original meanings of texts, as Sawyer recognises. He notes that opponents to reception history might hold the view that 'complete subjectivity' can result from a discipline which places its emphasis on reader-response.⁹

A growing need for boundaries within the field of biblical studies is reported by Roberts, with the 'hermeneutic goals' of each discipline defined. The purpose and emphasis of reception history is different to that of, for example, historical criticism or literary criticism. In addition, Roberts perceives a necessity for parameters to be established around biblical texts, based upon academic conventions (however defined), so as to avoid the level of subjectivity about which critics of reception history are concerned: it is important that whilst meaning is produced by the reader of a text, not all interpretations and responses should be considered to be equally valid.¹⁰ This seems problematic as it seeks to restrict which voices can be heard in any discussion around validity of interpretation. Donald Hagner, analysing the work of Luz, suggests that the boundary between 'empirically verifiable' interpretations and those of individual readers can be seen as two aspects of a multifaceted search for meaning and so can be complementary.¹¹

Christine Joynt notes that the Centre for Reception History of the Bible at Oxford University ('the Centre') supports research into fields which previously sat outside biblical studies, including church history, art history,

⁸ B. CHILDS *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp.719-721.

⁹ J.F.A. SAWYER *The Role of Reception Theory, Reader-Response Criticism and/or Impact History in the Study of the Bible*, p.2.

¹⁰ J. ROBERTS 'Introduction', pp.4-5.

¹¹ D.A. HAGNER (2022) 'Review: Matthew 8-20, by Ulrich Luz.' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121, 4: 768, cited by J. ROBERTS 'Introduction', p.4.

music history and English literature, all of which can be brought into the study of reception history.¹² The Centre has grown in significance with scholars interacting across a wide number of academic disciplines. Joynes also reports that the impact of reception history has deepened, citing Timothy Beal's assertion that it is 'comparable to the influence of source and form criticism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and to the influence of rhetorical and literary criticism over the past several decades.'¹³ Joynes affirms that the Centre has been rigorous in ensuring that debate has continued, so that the voices of both proponents and opponents of reception history are heard, but that 'new areas of biblical reception have gathered momentum'.¹⁴

To this student it would seem that understanding the purpose and merits of both reception history and more traditional approaches is essential in applying either hermeneutic, but that with such understanding, reception history can have an important place within the wider discipline of biblical studies, as the work of the Centre would suggest. To demonstrate this, the following case study will now be explored.

The application of reception history: a case study

The 'blood cry' is unique to Matthew's Gospel (Matt. 27:25). This is the reported response by the Jewish people to Pilate's refusal to be responsible for executing Jesus: 'the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!"' This verse has, as the *Jewish Annotated New Testament* asserts, 'resulted in Christians, throughout the generations, blaming Jews for Jesus' death.' Early readers of the Gospel might well have considered this cry to have referred to the people of Jerusalem whose 'punishment' was to have been taken into slavery or killed in the anti-Roman uprising which resulted in the destruction of the Temple.¹⁵ This theory of the authorial intention of Matthew is confirmed by Eugene Boring in his commentary on Matthew's Gospel: the evangelist is writing an 'anti-Jewish polemic' in which the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE is recognised as a retributive disaster which impacted on those present at Jesus' trial (c. 30 CE) and the following generation, but on those people only: guilt is not invoked or implied for all future generations of Jews as, from Matthew's perspective, the sentence has already been exacted.¹⁶ Matthew has, in fact, applied a form of biblical reception in composing his Gospel, writing about a widely-known event, applying his knowledge of later circumstances. The concept of a people accepting or receiving the blame for the death of an innocent can be found in the Hebrew Bible: for example, Josh. 2:19-20 and 2 Sam. 1:16; this might well have been utilised by Matthew to explain the destruction of the Temple.

¹² C.E. JOYNES 'Changing Horizons: Reflections on a decade at Oxford University's Centre for Reception History of the Bible', *Journal of the Bible and its Reception* 1, 1 (2014), p.164.

¹³ T.K. BEAL (2011) 'Reception History and Beyond: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures.' *Biblical Interpretation* 19: 357–372, cited by C.E. JOYNES 'Changing Horizons', p.168.

¹⁴ C.E. JOYNES 'Changing Horizons', p.170.

¹⁵ Footnotes and textual analysis within A-J Levine and M.Z. Brettler (eds.) *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp.62-64.

¹⁶ E.M. BORING 'The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections' in *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary: Vol. VII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), pp.362-363.

The impact of negative reception is exemplified in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*: a blood-thirsty Jewish man is willing to kill an innocent Christian man. Callaway suggests that the character of Shylock might have been an exaggerated stereotype but would likely have accorded with public perception of a despised minority.¹⁷ There can be little doubt that such prejudice remained in the twentieth century, seen in the propaganda of Nazi Germany which enabled the Holocaust perpetrated on the Jewish people.¹⁸ In the decades since this shocking event, as Callaway notes, a portrayal of Shylock might well be sympathetic to a 'marginalized outsider'.¹⁹

Amy-Jill Levine explores anti-Jewish sentiment found throughout the history of Christianity through reception of biblical texts. She illuminates the importance of clear teaching and preaching to avoid the continuation of anti-Semitism, particularly with regard to 'ahistorical interpretations' first among which is the 'blood cry'.²⁰ The way such texts are framed is thus critical in ensuring that negative influences are not perpetuated

The reception history of this passage has clearly had a significant impact. Understanding how the text has been received and interpreted is crucial for all those who, like this student, have responsibility for preaching the Bible and teaching Christian beliefs.²¹

Conclusion: the value of reception history in biblical studies

Reception history has been defined as an understanding of the ways in which a biblical text has impacted upon readers and their societies over time. Meaning is generated in the response of the reader, rather than by seeking to understand the original context of a text, and is therefore subjective. Whilst not universally accepted by biblical scholars, with opponents arguing against subjectivity in preference to seeking absolute meanings, reception history has become an important and established discipline within biblical studies. As the case study has highlighted, it is crucial to understand how a text has been received by others and to recognise the impact of this so that one can avoid perpetuating harmful interpretations. For this student, the value of reception history for those engaged in biblical studies is clear.

Word count: 1,646 words, excluding footnotes.

¹⁷ M.C. CALLAWAY *What's the use of Reception History?*, p.4.

¹⁸ Alongside other persecuted minority groups, including travelling communities, LGBT+ people and those with disabilities.

¹⁹ M.C. CALLAWAY *What's the use of Reception History?*, p.4.

²⁰ A-J. LEVINE 'Bearing False Witness: Common errors made about early Judaism' in A-J Levine and M.Z. Brettler (eds.) *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p.760.

²¹ It is worth noting that historical-critical interpretation has been employed in seeking to refute the tragic misinterpretation of earlier readers of the Gospel: a synthesis of both this and reception history has been helpful.

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